



## Church People Murdered and Harassed in the Philippines

October 2020



Christian human rights defender and health worker, Zara Alvarez, was murdered in the Philippines on 17 August 2020. At 8 pm, Zara, aged 39, was gunned down by unidentified assassins who escaped on a motorbike along Sta. Maria St., Brgy. Mandalagan, Bacolod City. She was headed to her home after buying dinner when she was shot six times outside of a convenience store. Zara was a human rights worker of Karapatan, a paralegal and an ecumenical volunteer for the Church Workers Solidarity Group in San Carlos Diocese.

She had recently documented extrajudicial executions by Philippines security forces and other human rights abuses for a UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights report.

Before her murder, Zara has long been a target of military and police harassment and intimidation. She received death threats for more than a year as a result of her human rights work.

Zara had previously been imprisoned in 2012 for two years while clearing her name of a trumped-up murder charge brought against her by the Philippines military.

She was the mother of an 11-year-old daughter.

The JIM Cluster has worked with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), South Luzon Jurisdictional Area to produce a report entitled *"They cannot kill our faith"*. The report documents murders, attempted murders, death threats and harassment of church people in the Philippines under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. The report can be downloaded from <https://justact.org.au/international-peace/reports/>

The report finds that no one in the churches is safe if they are engaged in social justice advocacy in the Philippines. Those targeted have included senior bishops, priests, ministers, pastors and lay members of the churches.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines stated in June 2020 concerning the murder, harassment and intimidation of church people:

*Most of the church people targeted in this way are those primarily fulfilling the Christian mandate and mission of ministering to the poor and the marginalised. They undertake their prophetic task as Christians to be with the people, especially in times when the basic human rights of people and communities are being undermined. Their Christian mandate compels them to be with the last of the least and with the poorest of the poor to defend God's image in every human being. Their faith compels them to accompany people in asserting and attaining their full rights, but they are vilified, harassed and even killed for doing so.*

Murders of church people have occurred in the context of the Duterte Administration's 'drug war', which has seen thousands of extrajudicial executions. President Duterte promised during his election campaign to orchestrate the mass extrajudicial killing of people involved in the drug trade. Extrajudicial killings are where police, soldiers or hired death squads murder people without the need for any evidence of having done anything wrong or judicial oversight. The victims of the 'drug war' have often been people from impoverished backgrounds who used drugs, but also people with no connection at all to illicit drugs.

President Duterte has made many public comments that have encouraged members of the police and the military to engage in egregious human rights abuses. He has promised to protect them from the judicial system.

Those responsible for the murders of church people, human rights defenders, environmentalists, and social justice advocates are very rarely held to account.



The report presents the cases of 16 church members, ministers and priests murdered between 2017 and 2020.

### What you can do

Write polite and respectful letters or e-mails to:

Her Excellency Mrs Ma. Hellen BARBER DE LA VEGA  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Philippines  
Embassy of the Philippines  
1 Moonah Place  
Yarralumla, ACT 2600

Salutation: Your Excellency

E-mail: [cbrpe@philembassy.org.au](mailto:cbrpe@philembassy.org.au)

Points to make in your letter:

- Express deep concern at the murder of church people involved in defending human rights and the environment in the Philippines.
- Also, express concern at the evidence that members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines have been active in harassing church people involved in defending human rights.
- Ask that the Philippines Government send a clear signal that the murders, intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders are unacceptable and those responsible will be held to account.
- Seek assurances that the Philippines authorities will thoroughly investigate all cases of murders of human rights defenders, social justice advocates and environmentalists. Ask that they make every effort to bring to justice those responsible for carrying out the murders, and their architects.
- Ask that the Philippines Government promptly and fairly compensate the families of victims of extrajudicial killings carried out by police or the military or those associated with the security forces.
- Ask that the Government of the Philippines maintain adequate funding to the Commission on Human Rights in the Philippines. They should also strengthen its investigative and forensic capacity.
- Ask that the Philippines Government invite relevant UN Special Rapporteurs to monitor and report on specific human rights concerns in the Philippines.

Also send letters to:

Senator the Hon Marise Payne  
Minister for Foreign Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

Points to make in your letter:

- Express concern at the murder of human rights defenders in the Philippines
- Request the Australian Government urge the Philippines Government to take the necessary measures to protect human rights defenders from extrajudicial killings, harassment and intimidation.
- Ask that they request the Philippines Government invite relevant UN Special Rapporteurs to monitor and report on specific human rights concerns in the Philippines.
- Ask what funding the Australian Government is providing to human rights organisations working on extrajudicial killings in the Philippines.
- Also ask what funding and technical assistance is being provided to the Commission for Human Rights in the Philippines.